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Fascism

Fascism and the far right; twenty years on

- Debate - Fascism -

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Let me start with the origins of my book Fascism: Theory and Practice. I will then set out – using a deliberately old-fashioned, Marxist term – what my perspective would be if I was to think today about the same questions now.

When I wrote the book, I had gone straight from undergraduate work to a PhD and the book originated as a literature review to accompany a project of mapping out the relationship between fascism and anti-fascism in Britain in the three key periods of 1936-9, 1941-1951 and 1972-1979.

My PhD looked, in a very British History purely empirical fashion, at the second of these periods. I later published a further monograph looking at the 1970s. Whatever the merits or otherwise of my two books on the 1940s and 1970s, they were animated by a key insight, namely that the right has always had to deal with the problem of hostility from the left and that its strategies for dealing with opposition have at certain key moments been central to what the right has been.

Whether that's Mosley's turn to National Socialism in 1934, or his Hegelianism in the 1940s and 1950s or the BNP's electoral strategy in the 1990s – every one of these moves, it can sensibly be argued, did not rise "from within" but principally to address the problems caused by determined opposition.

Similar thinking, of course, informs my book on fascism. Although the focus there is not on British but on generic (Italian, German and post-war) fascism.

A further idea in the book was that if war or genocide were ever to return to the most wealthiest countries of the world this could come about only through fascism. Here, I want to explore today some of the unspoken assumptions that underpinned this belief. One was an unspoken idea that countries such as the United States or Britain had made a long-term shift towards both political and social democracy. For someone who grew up, as I did, in the 1970s it was easy to tell yourself that a society which prioritised health care, pensions, etc, would never except in the very most extreme circumstances adopt a policy of inter-power war or domestic genocide. Of course, even I was a younger I was well aware that there were still wars, but these were exported to what we used to call the Third World.

That could change, I assumed, but only as a result of the emergence of political forces which called publicly for return to genocide and war. And the only political movement which had advocated these as options at any time since 1914 were fascists.

Another idea which lay behind the book was that there were structural limits to the number of political forms which were capable of becoming majority movements. In other words, capitalism gave rise to conservatism, socialism, liberalism, communism and fascism. And there the list ended.

Fascism was a recurring presence in the 1970s, in memory of the 1920s and 1930s when it had taken the feelings of bewilderment and alienation that arose in an epoch of reformist modernisation, and the perceived threat of the far-left, and sought to build against them both a counter-revolutionary alternative. But because the post-war period was an epoch of polarised near-majorities, there was a limited space for ideological diversity.

In the 1970s and 1980s, it was common for commentators to use the term "far right" as a short-hand for mimetic fascist parties formed in conscious emulation of the 1930s. In my book, I am very critical of that language.

One possibility I excluded, however, was a genuine “far right” – i.e. a series of parties, in several countries, working in more or less alliance, who were permanently at ease in a political space which was different both from traditional conservatism and fascism. A party like UKIP, in Britain. Or the victory of Donald Trump.

When I wrote Fascism: Theory and Practice I was interested in how fascist parties had been radicalised to the right. This was a phenomenon which had no other sustained counterpart at any time since the adoption of democracy. We are more than familiar with the process by which legality had tamed outsider movements of the left. IE presented with a dominant politics which was close enough to their own, the socialists had reached a rapprochement existing capitalist elites. And in the 1960s and 1970s something similar happened to the European Communist Parties, most coherently in Italy. And of course there have been several outsider movements of the right which crashed and burned and left no legacy.

Through the early post-war years fascism, irrespective of its different goals and origins, maintained a fascination partly because it had not gone through a similar process of self-domestication but had in fact radicalised in office.

The reasons for fascism’s radicalisation were in part internal, there was a tension between fascism’s popular base and its reactionary politics and in order to resolve this tension fascism had to promise ever more things to its supporters, i.e. because it couldn’t offer them social utopia it had to give them genocide and war. This was the core argument of Fascism: Theory and Practice, that a contradictory political formation might in fact draw energy precisely from its unsustainable, broken nature.

This dynamic was also in part external (and in my book I underestimate the way in which fascism was the product of relationships between rival international parties), i.e. that there was an epoch of emulation and competition in which Hitler copied Mussolini’s march on Rome, his influence over other right-wing states in Austria and Spain, etc. He took Mussolini’s victories, drew on, and overreached them.

Fascism’s energy is why its definition of fascism mattered – because if fascism could be identified, the threat of war and genocide would be averted.

Where I think the anti-fascism I argued in the 1990s was principally wrong is that I failed to see that the historical context had changed. While I borrowed from the left of which I was part the phrase that the 1990s was like the 1930s in a slow motion, there was no analysis behind that phrase, no real sense that for twenty years we had been living in a world characterised not by reforms but by their opposite.

If I was going to begin defining fascism today my starting point would be this: that the age of social reform is over. Whether it ended in 1973 (Chile) or 1979 or 1980, it has been over for an entire historical epoch.

In addition, outside an epoch of social reform, there is no structural limit to the forms of politics which are capable of winning majorities

In an age of social reform, it was possible for reformist parties to bind workers to them by passing laws to increase trade union rights or build social housing, these benefitted specific voters, who would in turn vote for that party. There was a consensus that reforms were desirable and politics was in many countries a contest between two managerial parties who converged on the aim of politics and challenged each other in the realism of competence. This meant that many political systems were in essence two-party competitions between one main social democratic and a conservative party. These was a limited space at each fringe for fascists and Communists, and no-one else.

In an epoch where reforms are being destroyed, the dominant form of voting is negative, people vote against neo-liberal parties which destroy industry, against social democracy which no longer delivers, against incumbent parties. We are no longer in a moment where the forms of politics are limited to a few main options which are reproduced internationally. Instead political forms are splintering. Indeed new forms emerge, of course, on the left as well as on the right.

In addition, the stigma against war and genocide has been radically diminished. We have had wars, Vietnam, Iraq, the constant ongoing war since 9/11. Meanwhile, although no developed country is formally at war some live under emergency regimes in response to the threat of terrorism and in others the threat of Islamism is used to justify the extension of the authoritarian state e.g. deportation regimes that would normally be sustainable only in wartime.

The monopoly of military technology by 5-6 of the richest states means that their inhabitants are never casualties of war, never saw death, and become glib about the consequence of war returning even between major states.

For all these reasons, we are seeing increasing numbers of states – not just in the periphery but also in the global core – whose political instincts are military and authoritarian. Attacks on migrants, refugees, travel bans are the new normal.

The utility of the equation “fascism = war and genocide” was that it was reversible (i.e. only fascism could returns us to an age of horrors). Outside an epoch of social reform, the equation has less use. War may come from other sources.

Fascism was only ever one form of mass, reactionary politics. And there is no particular reason why the reactionary mass movements of the future might not share some but not all of fascism’s external forms.

Moreover, because fascism’s name still has an overwhelming stigma, a future “fascism” would be far more effective if it emerged on a seemingly brand new basis, with the minimum copying in relation to the past. In consequence, the post-war history of the far right is of a series of attempts to reproduce the dynamic of fascism without needing fascism’s surface forms.

Yet, precisely because the right feels that it has escaped the past and is not vulnerable to the criticism “but you are just fascists”, you are starting to see a re-convergence between various aspects of interwar fascism and today’s non-fascist right.

Unlike the short twentieth century when the structure of the political system itself put real limits on what forms of politics were achievable, the structural limits of the present against authoritarianism are much less than they were.

The leading figures of the far right are well aware that fascism retains a considerable historical stigma and the further they distance themselves from fascism the more successful they are likely to be. Yet at the same time, they are aware that fascism was a complex and sophisticated reaction to historical opportunities. And that in so far as they want to emulate the rapid, dramatic changes that fascism once enacted, they have a motive for reassembling parts of fascist organisation and ideology.

So we see a return to executive rather than parliamentary rule, to anti-semitism, not from mere nostalgia or mimicry but because these behaviours help the non-fascist right achieve goals which are harder to win if the entire past has to be rejected.

The relationship of the non-fascist authoritarian right to inter-war fascism is therefore always of a dual character, with elements of both disavowal and re-adoption and indeed a constant shuffling between rejection and return.

The theory I am aiming towards is an “anti-fascist” theory of the far-right but I mean by that something very specific.

In the 1970s it was possible to shame a member of the National Front by calling them a fascist, by saying that they were the slaves of a leadership which was both indebted to its past and embarrassed by it. The same approach still worked, to some extent, as recently as the early 2000s. The extent of the contemporary far-right’s distancing from fascism means that this approach has lost its edge.

What is needed is a theoretical counterpart to the activist realisation that the crimes of Steve Bannon or Marine Le Pen are not the things that a different generation did before them, but what they will do in future, if only we let them.

Lives running